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Midnight and Silvered Glass

by Emily Michel

Chapter 1

Had anyone told Betony that her fairy tale began at a ball, she would've laughed. Once upon a time, she loved balls. They were rare and precious events she was not allowed to attend until she was thirteen. She loved the gowns, the well-dressed men, the music, the dancing, and the food, but her years in Faerie had put a damper on her enjoyment. Now she had little patience for the small talk and the court politics.

Bet jumped as her door flew open and a chestnut-haired woman surrounded by outrageous layers of golden silk and tulle barged in. The woman slammed the door behind her and leaned against it, bringing a finger to her lips.

"I was never here," Rane mumbled through clenched teeth.

Bet smiled at her sister, twisted her fingers over her lips, and threw away the imaginary key. The pitter-patter of little feet and giggles seeped under the door as Jonquil toddled down the hall, followed by the heavier footfalls of his father.

"Get back here, you little imp." The thick wood muffled Nevar's voice, but the humor behind his words permeated the air as the women held their breaths.

When the last echoes faded, Rane pranced across the sitting room and dramatically collapsed onto a settee, releasing a great sigh.

"I love him dearly, but he had honey dripping off his hands. *Honey*. Why did no one warn me children were so...sticky?" Her hand fluttered about before it rested on her forehead in a theatrical gesture.

Bet chuckled and slipped into her bedchamber without answering. Every last person in her family had warned Rane, but as usual, her sister had ignored them all. Especially since nearly every story about sticky children had been about Rane herself. The Crown Princess of Lorea had been an...exuberant child. It was one of the things Bet loved best about her older sister.

To be fair, Rane was an exuberant adult, too. The current situation was not an outlier.

The swish of silk followed Bet, only to pause on the threshold.

“I forgot how they follow you,” Rane said quietly.

Their mother’s white dogs were curled on the rug at the foot, ears and paws twitching in their sleep. Two cats looked up from the bed. A half dozen mice sat upon the trunk shoved under the windows, and a blue and white bird perched on the far bedpost.

“Hush.” Bet used her magic to soothe them all back to sleep. The bird puffed his feathers and let out a chiding whistle. Bet rolled her eyes but continued in a soft voice. “You’re right, I’ll need your help shortly.”

The bird settled, and Bet turned to her sister. “Sorry, I know it takes some getting used to, even in Faerie.”

Rane gestured dismissively. “I just forgot, and really, I missed it. Mother’s dogs bother the shit out of Bash when you’re not around.”

Her sister was being kind. When Betony was growing up, her retinue of animals followed her everywhere in the castle, and the staff had always looked oddly at her parade. It was strange and had set her apart from the plain humans. The gift was not unheard of in Faerie, but it was rare enough *she* gave lessons to fairies. Rane’s gaze raked Betony from head to toe, taking in her gown.

“Ooh, your dress is gorgeous. You did the embroidery yourself, didn’t you?”

Bet lifted an arm and proudly examined her handiwork on the sleeves, feathers outlined in white thread on the cerulean gown. “Yes. Designed it and ordered the thread right after last year’s Winter Solstice Ball.”

Her sister’s face went all innocent. “And I forget, what bird are you going as?”

Bet would wager every jewel in her chest that Rane hadn’t forgotten at all, but she played along. After all, it had been a long time since she laughed with her sister.

“A Lorean blue *tit*.” The same as the little bird perched on the bedpost.

Rane’s signature snort started, changing quickly into an infectious laugh, one Bet could not resist. Soon, they were both red-faced with laughter, no better than twelve-year-olds.

“Stop...” Rane coughed. “We can’t go to the ball like this!”

“Why not?” Bet dabbed a tear away with her handkerchief. She was not risking ruining the fine embroidery that took nearly a year to complete by wiping her face on her sleeves. “You’re already married, and I’m not interested in a single man who will be there.”

They would all be relatives or men she’d met a thousand times before. Men she’d rejected long ago by staying in Faerie so long. But Rane had asked her to return home. Their brother Ebon was off searching for the northern clan behind the raids on Faerie and Lorea with his new wife, the spymaster of Faerie. Mother had been most displeased at receiving only a brief note before they set sail.

Rane needed someone she could trust absolutely at court. Unlike many noble families, the Lorean royal children loved each other. Even more importantly, they *liked* each other.

“You never know. The ambassador from Fuartir and his entourage will be there. Could be an eligible bachelor among the northerners. And nearly every noble family is attending.”

Bet stopped herself from grimacing. The northern barbarians, the fairies called them. Centuries of hot and cold wars, but in the last few years, relations between Lorea and Fuartir had thawed, bringing hope conditions may improve for everyone, Loreans, northerners, and fairies alike. The road would be long, and no serious progress could be made until the raiders were brought to heel, but the possibility of a lasting peace was more real than it had ever been.

But too many of the noble families of Lorea were barely better, greedy for power, prestige, or wealth. Her father worked hard to reward those who showed compassion, reason, and restraint. His reign had uplifted many commoners and narrowed the wealth gap. Unfortunately, she was already related to most of the families who showed the characteristics she most valued, but perhaps there was a diamond among the chaff who would be at the ball.

“Unlikely. I caught a glimpse of the ambassador yesterday. He’s old. Not everyone is as lucky as you.”

Rane grabbed a pillow from Betony's bed and threw it at her. Bet skillfully caught it and tossed it where it belonged.

"You're right. The goddess smiled down on me when King Armel chose Nevar to be his ambassador. You'll get lucky someday, little sister."

Maybe she would, but she wasn't worried about it. With the crown princess married and an heir produced, Bet felt no pressure to find a match yet. She was only twenty-five, and not only was the Lorean royal family long-lived, but she was also fae. Her fairy ancestry was apparent in her cranberry hair. And her magic. Mustn't forget that. No one would let her.

"Can you finish my laces?" she asked as she slid on her slippers. They sparkled with beads of silvered glass, shining jewels in the firelight.

Rane pulled until her laces were snug, but not tight, just how Bet liked them. She smoothed her skirt.

"Do you need help with your hair, too?" Rane tucked a lock behind Bet's ear.

"From you?" Bet snorted.

Rane scowled in jest, but her eyes twinkled. Moss-green, as were their father's. Hair like his, too, while Bet had the fairy-bright hair, and her eyes were a brilliant emerald. Ebon was a mix of their mother, with her darkling eyes, and their father, with the same dark chestnut hair as Rane. The only two features the three siblings shared were a heart-shaped face and golden beige skin. But at least Rane and Ebon blended in. Bet stood out like a rooster in a henhouse, though she was more chick size.

Bet whistled a three-note tune, and her feathered sidekick fluttered over. He took strands of her hair, twisting and weaving, while she shoved hairpins with cascading glass beads matching her shoes into the elaborate coiffure. Soon, the bird chirped his approval. The beads glimmered like stars in her hair.

"Ooh, me too!" Rane fought the squeal, and her voice came out all cracked.

With another whistle, the bird jumped to her sister and in a few moments, complicated braids spilled down Rane's back. While her sister was distracted, Bet slipped a small knife from under her pillow and into her pocket. It never hurt to be prepared, and the knife was easier to conceal than her staff.

The blue bird retreated to his perch on the bedpost, looking self-satisfied, the scamp. Just in time too, as someone pounded on the door.

"I know you're in there, Rane." Nevar's voice rumbled through the heavy wood. "You forgot your mask."

Her sister sighed and looped her arm around Bet's. "A crown princess's duty is never done. Still sure you don't want the job?"

Bet snagged her own mask, a bejeweled replica of a blue tit's head, complete with a tiny black beak, from the dressing table on their way out.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

"Ah, well, can't blame me for trying."

Rane pulled open the door to a handsome man with reddish-brown skin dressed in green, his matching mask atop his tightly curled hair. He handed a gold mask to his wife and placed a tender kiss on her lips.

"You look beautiful, my love." His eyes shone in adoration.

Betony hoped she would find someone who looked at her with devotion, wonder, and passion all in a single glance.

"And Bet, you are a vision, truly," he continued, barely looking her way.

"Spoken like a dedicated diplomat," Bet said brightly. It was an old joke yet fitting. Nevar had been a diplomat, and still handled most of the matters needing a lighter touch than her sister's.

"Come, ladies, the ball awaits. And god forbid we have to stay past midnight." He offered his arm to Rane.

"I am not a fucking lady," Rane responded, but her voice lacked anger.

"No, you're a princess. And so am I." Bet tied on her mask. "What happens at midnight?"

“Parents pass out cold. Why do you think the king and queen always leave early? Rane assures me it’s a Lorean phenomenon.”

Laughter echoed in the hall as they walked to the ballroom. Rane was right. Who knew what this night would hold? Perhaps she’d find her prince after all. Stranger things had happened.



Chapter 2

Her bright hair sparkled with stars, and her laughter was a delicate melody that raised the hairs on the back of Dorin's neck. He waited for the princesses to disappear around the corner before he emerged from the shadows. He shook off the odd feeling, ducked down another hall, and trudged up some stairs, hurrying to the Fuartiran ambassador's quarters.

"You're late," Ambassador Vedel said, whipping around as Dorin slipped in. The gray-haired man wore a stern frown, and his impatience filled the air.

"Apologies, milord." Dorin hung the sequin-bedecked costume he'd been carrying on the side of the wardrobe. "I took a wrong turn and found myself in the royal corridor as the crown princess and her sister exited. I didn't want to draw any attention."

Only half a lie. He'd been exactly where he'd meant to be but hadn't expected company yet. The ambassador grunted and waved a hand before undoing the laces on his tunic.

"What do you think of our recent arrival?"

Princess Betony, he meant. The diminutive fae woman had only arrived a few days ago, and this had been his second glimpse of her. The first had been as she cantered into the stables with her fine white gelding and handed him the reins while she prepared to rub down the horse.

"I'm not sure," he answered honestly.

"Strange hair, that girl."

It was strange, yet whimsically beautiful. He wanted to run his fingers through it, see if it was as soft as the silk it reminded him of.

"I understand unusual hair is a mark of her fairy blood." Vedel should know this. He'd been the clan chief's second for decades, had helped Clan Fher rise to be the most powerful of the seven Fuartiran clans.

The ambassador shivered, and his lips thinned in disgust. He dropped the subject as he pulled on a new deep blue tunic. Dorin handed him a light blue velvet doublet covered in dark blue sequins that matched the tunic. Vedel glittered like a wave on a sunny day. Dorin buttoned the garment, brushed off a stray bit of fluff, and ran a comb through the ambassador's thinning hair. His blue eyes snapped with impatience.

"Very impressive, milord," Dorin said after a last look over to ensure everything appeared just right. He grabbed a wooden mask painted white and blue to mimic glacier ice. Large icicle projections stuck out from the top.

Vedel snatched the mask from Dorin's hands. "I will leave the ball as soon as the bells finish tolling midnight. I am unused to late nights, and I expect you to be here to help me undress. Do nothing foolish."

The ambassador strode from the room. Holding his tongue, Dorin bowed as Vedel left and pulled the door shut behind him.

The old man treated him as though Dorin wasn't a trusted manservant trained by the clan chief's own chamberlain, as though Dorin wasn't someone to fear. But correcting the ambassador was a terrible idea. Not only was he proud and a stickler for hierarchy, but he had no idea what Dorin actually was. Few did. The best way to get on Vedel's good side was to demonstrate his skills.

Dorin slipped through the door on the other wall and into his own small chamber, always at the ready to serve his lord. He stripped off a well-constructed but plain gray jerkin and woolen tunic, dropping them to the floor. He might miss all the hidden pockets in the jerkin, but he had a part to play tonight. Freshening

up in the washbasin, Dorin enjoyed the piney scent of the soap, a small luxury he had brought from home that reminded him of the woods outside his village.

What had he thought of Betony? She'd noticed he was new and asked his name upon her arrival. When she realized he was with the ambassador's party, she'd apologized for mistaking him for a stable hand. Unusual treatment from someone so high in the hierarchy. How she'd laughed with her sister and her brother-in-law sent a stab of envy into his gut. He was lucky when his brothers ignored him and had spent most of his childhood praying to both Alet and Zovog they would forget he ever existed. Besides his mother, the only person in his family who didn't look at him as if he was something to be scraped off a boot was his sister. She was merely content to pretend he'd never been born.

Ablutions done, he pulled out his costume. Or perhaps disguise was the better term.

Dorin was medium. Medium height, medium build, medium brown hair, medium beige skin tone. Generically handsome enough to avoid being singled out for being ugly, not so handsome to garner undue attention. *Nothing* about him would draw undue attention, which was a key part of his pretense and allowed him to be unnoticeable.

Tonight, his job was to keep his eyes and ears open and report to Jani, who would pass along any news of interest to Chief Kalman. The chamberlain had known the ball would be an excellent opportunity to confirm gossip and get a feel for the pulse of the Lorean aristocracy. Many would be attending who rarely visited the castle of Avora, and what was said in whispers and innuendo was often far more valuable than what was said at the bargaining table. Information on whether the potential treaty with Fuartir was looked upon favorably, or with skepticism, or with hostility would be most useful. He had supplied Dorin with coin to buy an outfit worthy of a lord so he could sneak into the ball unbeknownst to the egotistical ambassador.

His disguise was the best he could afford. The breeches were an earthy green, well-made but with little decoration. The tunic matched, but the quilted silk doublet was gold with red, brown, and orange leaves embroidered on it, and his half-mask was a work of art. He had carved it himself from a single piece of maple he'd found outside the stable. The bottom section preserved the bark, but the top edge was covered in sculpted leaves and painted to match those embroidered on his doublet.

He tied it around his head and listened at the door. Silence. He cracked it open and glanced up and down the hall. No one. Perfect. Dorin stepped out, pulling on the hem of his doublet and adopting his persona for the night.

He straightened his back and lifted his chin as he moved into the center of the hall. He was no longer a trusted servant, but a young lord who belonged in these corridors in his own right.

"Good evening, milord," said a servant he passed as he strode to the ballroom.

The clerics of Zovog had trained him well.

He waited until the pages were busy helping other nobles before strolling into the crowded, brightly lit room as though he owned it. Tonight he wasn't Dorin, bastard son of Chief Kalman of the Fher Clan, tolerated only when useful. No, he passed himself off as Lord Drees from a small holding outside Teruelle.

Dorin grabbed a glass of red wine and mingled.

"A blessed solstice to you all," he said in an aristocratic Teruellan accent as he joined a small group of Loreans. Mid-level nobility judging by the costumes.

Already well in their cups, they returned his greeting enthusiastically. He was here to gather whatever gossip he could, gossip Vedel couldn't. The Loreans were too reticent around the ambassador and the other officials. Smart people, both the royals and their subjects. At best, the ambassador had only Fuartir's interests in mind. At worst, only his own. Another part of Dorin's job was to find out which.

They seemed to have no qualms about sharing with a young Teruellan lord. The women flirted casually, and the men clapped him on the back. But one person seemed to be on everyone's mind.

"I heard Princess Betony embroidered her own gown," a young lady said in an awestruck tone.

“Why did the crown princess call her sister back to court?” an older man asked an even older woman.

“I haven’t seen Prince Ebon lately. Perhaps that’s why,” the woman replied.

In yet another conversation, a young lordling eyed the princess appreciatively from across the ballroom before saying, “I wonder when she’ll start courting.”

Dorin tucked away the bits and bobs of gossip, rumor, and tales. He would write a letter to the chamberlain before bed to be sent by pigeon if urgent, and by barge and ship if not. So far, it seemed ship would win out. Why the princess had returned and who she might court were of interest, but not critical.

Music filled the air, and couples whirled across the dance floor, led in large part by Crown Princess Ranunculus and her consort, Prince Nevar. Despite being the center of conversation tonight, Princess Betony was alone at the edge of the crowd, looking as if she’d prefer to disappear into the tapestries lining the walls.

Nonsense. No one so beautiful should sit out a ball. Not to mention, if there was anything to know about the royals, what better way to find out than flatter the lonely youngest daughter? Or so he tried to convince himself. It had nothing at all to do with his fascination with the fae princess. Nothing at all.

Dorin snagged two glasses of the bubbly wine the Loreans preferred and headed straight for her. She twisted a ring on her finger, but her alert eyes behind the blue, black, and white bird mask scanned the crowd.

“Who are you waiting for, my lady?” he asked, still in his posh accent.

She jumped and reached into a pocket cleverly concealed in the pleats of the dress. For an instant, Dorin was sure she had a weapon, but what could she possibly conceal in a pocket? Betony examined him and must have decided he posed no threat. The hand came out of the pocket, and she pasted on a fake smile.

“My goodness, you startled me, my lord...”

Her voice was sweet, too sweet, and belied by her eyes. They were sharp and considering, trying desperately to place him.

He gave her an enigmatic smile and held out one of the drinks he carried.

“Now, now. What fun is it to reveal my identity at a masquerade ball?”

She shifted away from the wall and took the offered drink.

“Fair enough, though you can probably guess who I am.”

“True, but let’s pretend I can’t.”

His words earned him a smile bright enough to take his breath away, if he was so inclined. Which he wasn’t. He was not a flirty young lord, and he had a job to do.

“To pretense, then.” He lifted his glass to hers.

A small chime rang out as the glasses touched.

“To pretense.”

Betony sipped her drink, and Dorin couldn’t tear his gaze from her pink lips touching the glass. Unthinking, he gulped a large swallow of the sweet, tangy concoction. The bubbles tickled his nose, and it took everything in his power to keep from sneezing the liquid all over the princess. Instead, he nearly choked.

“Are you quite all right, my lord?” The words seemed genuine, and she leaned in to pat his back gently in concern.

Dorin inhaled deeply, taking comfort in her warm touch. He placed his nearly full glass on a table. Whatever it was, the stuff was deadly to his sophisticated persona. Next time, he would forgo the bubbly and stick to a less festive drink. Water was never a bad choice.

“Yes, thank you. I do not think this is for me.”

“Want to know a secret?” She placed her glass next to his.

He raised a brow, and she smiled.

“It’s not my favorite, either. The bubbles tickle my nose. It makes me want to sneeze.”

Dorin couldn't help it. He barked out a laugh. "Precisely my problem."

"Well then, my lord, we are of the same mind."

She hooked her arm through his and started walking to a table loaded with food and beverages at the far end of the ballroom.

"Where are you taking me? My mother warned me not to go off with strange women."

"Why did you approach me in the first place? I am clearly the strangest woman here."

"Oh, surely not."

He glanced around. Well, perhaps she was right. Everyone else had hair in natural colors: blond, brown, black, a few gray-headed elders. A flash of red here and there. But her hair was the color of the lingonberries that grew in the temple garden he had helped his mother tend as a child. He remembered gathering them so she could make jam. He pushed aside the painful memory.

"For the moment, I am. Here we are!" Betony plucked two small glasses filled with a golden liquid and handed one to him. "The ambassador from Fuartir was kind enough to provide mead for Solstice. I snuck a taste earlier, and it's positively delightful. Cheers!"

As he sipped the drink from his homeland, the strangest notion crossed his mind—how would her lips taste after drinking this? He almost choked again.

She grinned at him, as though sensing his thought. "Good?"

He nodded and drained the glass, as did she. He thunked the glass on the table and held out a hand with an elegant flourish worthy of the lord he was pretending to be. "Would you care to dance, my lady?"

The princess placed her glass next to his and took his hand. "Yes, I would."

Dorin led her out to the other dancers as the band struck up a lively country tune. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. The heady scent of rosemary and something light and floral filled his senses, sending his heart racing.

"Do I need to lead, my lord?" Her nose twitched with humor as he paused, taking in the feel of her.

"No, I've got it. Just noting the tempo."

He stepped to the beat, whirling and twirling in time to the music as his mother taught him so many years ago. He was okay with a waltz, could never keep the formal dances straight, but this...this, he could handle.

He held Betony close, watching her breaths quicken, her cheeks flush. Her musical laughter blended beautifully with the instruments. Everything she did was beautiful and graceful.

This was...fun.

And it had been a dog's age since Dorin had fun.